



Common Responses to Disasters or Traumatic Events



“As dramatic as a person’s response to disaster can be, remember that they are reacting quite normally to very abnormal conditions.”

People react in a variety of different ways to disasters.

Professionals agree that there’s no one “healthy” pattern for reacting to a traumatic event. Some folks appear to be greatly disturbed while others throw themselves into recovery efforts or other activities showing little emotion or concern. Neither type of response is necessarily better than the other — it depends on the individual.

Most people experience some signs or symptoms of trauma-related stress after natural or personal disasters. Whether a person experiences these stress symptoms immediately after the disaster or later on, it is important to recognize them and help folks cope with their feelings.

Even when a person’s response to a disaster is very dramatic, it’s important to remember that they are reacting quite normally to very abnormal conditions. One aspect of stress reactions that can be most upsetting to the individual is the belief that no one else is experiencing what they are. Many folks are amazed to find out that others are thinking and feeling the same way.

Common Immediate Responses to Trauma or Disaster

You may notice some or all of the following, normal behaviors as you meet those who have been affected by a disaster:

- Shock, feeling dazed or numb
- Disorientation, confusion
- Disbelief
- Overwhelming sense of helplessness, despair, hopelessness
- Extreme fear that the disaster will occur again
- Feeling on edge, easily started, alert to any sign of danger
- Nervousness, feeling dizzy
- Restlessness, can’t sit still
- A racing heart

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- Feeling scattered, difficulty making decisions, difficulty concentrating
- Feeling sad or blue
- Fatigue, loss of appetite, low energy
- Crying spontaneously
- Withdrawing from others, feeling “disconnected” or isolated
- Anger/resentment toward others or no-one in particular, feeling irritable
- Feeling guilty about the losses of others or receiving help from others

Remember, these responses are considered normal. In a sense, they are an instinctive way for the body to protect itself from other trauma. These symptoms may last for days or weeks. However, the American Psychological Association has recommended that a person consider seeking help from a professional therapist if the symptoms last for more than a month.

Longer-term Reactions

People typically find that many of their immediate stress reactions decline or disappear after a little time. However, some folks continue to experience stress-related reactions for months, occasionally even years, after a traumatic event. Some common longer-term reactions include:

- Re-experiencing an event through nightmares, flashbacks and disruptive memories
- Avoiding situations or people that remind a person of the traumatic event
- Being startled easily or very dramatically
- Emotional withdrawal or avoiding social situations
- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Irritability
- Sadness or depression

Many times these troubling reactions can be triggered by places, people or objects that remind a person of the traumatic event. Often times, specific events or physical sensations cue a person for memories of a disaster or traumatic event.

Some common triggers of stress-related symptoms include:

- Anniversaries of the event

- Sights, sounds, smells or physical sensations that remind the person of the event
- Returning to the scene of the event
- Weather reports or other warning that a similar event could occur

If You Are Having Difficulties

“Remember, you are not alone.”

Remember, you are not alone. Many people are experiencing or have experiences many of the same feelings that you are having now. Your feelings are important, you are not being silly, weak or childish to have them. However, keep in mind that as bad as things seems right now, they will get better and these feelings will go away eventually.

Don't rush yourself. Make sure that you remain open to talking with others about how you're feeling. It's important. Take comfort in the fact that you're also helping someone else when they may need it most.

If you believe that you are having trouble handling the stress of the current situation, consider talking to someone. You decide when you are ready, but keep in mind that by working through your stress and emotions now, you may lessen your chances of having difficulties later.

Many mental health professionals volunteer their time to talk with victims of disaster or trauma. Your local American Red Cross chapter, Cooperative Extension office, mental health professional or mental health center can help connect you with someone who can provide help.